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## Image Worship in Chinese Popular Religion

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## IMAGE WORSHIP IN CHINESE POPULAR RELIGION

*Image worship is a central feature of Chinese popular religion. The orthodox view is that statues and other representations are mere aids for religious contemplation, however I argue that image worship is a power strategy.*

The relationship between people and their gods is contractual, rather than one of supplication. Prayers are requests for boons; for peace, good health and prosperity. The worshipper makes an offering promising more if the gods are responsive. Gods answer petitions to reward image worship because image worship is the means by which spirits are able to have a presence in the mortal world.

The figurative image is a magical doorway that enables spirits to enter the mortal realm. People make the images, and people perform *kai guang* (开光, enlightening) rituals that enliven the inert images. Gods are also dependent on continued image worship in order to grow in spirit power. Thus in the relationship between gods and people, it is the latter who have the upper hand.

Image worship is thus a power strategy. Gods are responsive to image worship because they are entirely dependent on people to give their spirits materiality through the making of anthropomorphic images, and gods gain power only if their images are worshipped, so that Hansen (1990: 48), writing on religion in Song (宋), noted: 'The gods lived, even vied for human recognition ... Without it, they languished.'

### **Fiction as *locus classicus***

I use the story of Nezha (哪吒) one of the characters in the Ming (明) novel *Fengshen Yanyi* (封神演义 *Creation of the Gods*) as the *locus classicus* for my theories on image worship.

Mythology has provided Chinese popular religion with a dramatic canon (Chan 2006: 42-55). Ancient storytellers and balladeers captured the imagination of the people with their tales of valiant warriors and supernatural heroes and continued exposure to these stories through theatre and books have concretised the images of the gods in the minds of the people to form an internalised repository of religious knowledge.

Others including Shahar (1996: 184-211) have argued the primary place of vernacular fiction in the transmission of god cults. Jordan (2008) considers the *Fengshen Yanyi*, as having the most important influence on popular understanding of Taoism as a religious system, a view I share.

### **Nezha's statue**

The section of Nezha's story which deals with image worship begins with the boy's suicide in atonement for the killing of the son of the Dragon King of the East Sea. Fairy

Primordial, Nezha's spiritual mentor wants Nezha to reincarnate to fight in the battle that would replace the Shang (商) dynasty with that of Zhou (周).

In order to be reincarnated to do his work, Nezha needs his image to be made and worshipped. So Nezha appears to his mother in a dream and asks her to set up his lifelike statue in a temple. If his image is worshipped for three years, Nezha would be reincarnated in human form.

All was done according to plan. A stream of devotees came to offer incense and candles to Nezha's statue. In turn, Nezha granted the wishes of the people bringing them peace and prosperity. But one day Lijing (李靖), Nezha's father learns of the image worship of his son. Thinking that his son was cheating the people, Lijing smashed the image and had the temple set on fire.

On that day, Nezha's soul was not in the temple. He returned at dusk to find it had been burnt down. However, by this time half a year of image worshipped had passed enabling Nezha to regain part of his shape and his voice. Nezha could then go to Fairy Primordial to perform a ritual to complete the process of his reincarnation (Gu 1996: 155-158).

This story presents us with many insights into image worship, chiefly; 1) a spirit incarnates into the mortal world in order to do work for man; 2) the spirit needs an effigy in order to reincarnate; 3) worship of the image by ordinary people empowers the spirit on which the image is modelled; 4) the spirit is not always in the image, so that the image is less a body which contains the spirit than it is a portal that provides spirits access to the mortal world.

### **Anthropomorphism made accessible gods**

I take the discussion of image worship as power strategy further to argue that the figurative image is set up specifically to work to serve worshippers.

Early institutional Daoist and Confucian beliefs were that heavenly forces, having neither matter nor form, could not be reproduced in three dimensions. The idea of the formless heaven can be traced to the Shang cult of the ancestor which was designed to achieve the impersonalization of the dead (Keightley 2006: 26-29). The ancestors were represented by wooden tablets that were worshipped in regulated rituals that did not allow any individuation of particular personalities. The Chinese did however make figurative sculptures, significantly, these were only of ordinary human beings at work; warriors, servants, farmers, and dancing girls. These lifelike figurines were placed inside to tombs for the utilitarian purpose of serving the dead.

Paludan (1991: 10-11) noted the convention; the lower the status of the person on which the statue was modelled, the more lifelike the representation. Dead emperors and nobility were not seen in statuary within their tombs, but lifelike figurines of servants and soldiers were plentiful. Thus we see that that spirits that are to be served need not be

represented in figurative images, but spirits who are to be put into service must be conjured up through the anthropomorphic image.

The legacy of the notion of remote supreme beings and responsive personal deities continues in Chinese popular religion today. The statues of Tiangong (天公), the Heavenly Emperor, are rarely seen on home altars and people instead address the open sky when they supplicate him. In contrast, lower status deities such as Da Er Ye Bo (大二爷伯 Elder and Second Grandpas) spirits of the underworld are vividly depicted as tall-and-thin, short-and-fat individuals with lolling tongues and staring eyes. Although the two are frightening to look upon, they are favourites with the people who believe that the pair of hell deities can always be counted on for lucky numbers. They are not so exalted as to be unaware that poor people need a little spare cash from the lottery.



A vivid depiction of Da Ye Bo, Elder Deity of the Underworld. Photo: Author.



This nanny goddess' bare breasts and swollen belly unmistakably mark her for duties as a wet-nurse, that is, her job is to see that babies do well. Photo: Author

### **Anthropomorphism as magical condition**

It is the condition of anthropomorphism that magically allows a spirit to enter to serve in the mortal realm. The idea can be traced to the funerary puppets of Zhou. Puppets were buried with the dead in the belief that these would self-animate to serve in the afterlife. The magic, I argue, is on account of the state of the puppet as a 'double-nature-being'. The character for puppet is illustrative of its ontology as 'double-nature-being' for it combines the 人 human radical with that of 鬼, ghost or spirit. The puppet is human in aspect, yet it is magical in spirit. The ideograph *kui* 傀 might be described in Western linguistic terms as both signifier (it is the representation that brings to mind the being on

which the puppet was modelled) and referent (it is the magical being that comes to live in a puppet performance).

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